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ABSTRACT

In the age of ever-growing technological advancements library media centers have become places of enormous discovery and adventure. But are teachers and administrators aware of all the resources available through the school library media centers? Do they know the importance that library media specialists play in the school curriculum planning? This article explores the leadership role of the library media specialist in school curriculum planning to provide the process for improving the learning environment for all students. (Author)

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The Role of the Library Media Specialist in the School Improvement Plan

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In the age of ever-growing technological advancements library media centers have become places of enormous discovery and adventure. But are our teachers and administrators aware of all the resources available through the school library media centers? Do they know the importance that library media specialists play in the school curriculum planning? This article explores the leadership role of the library media specialist in school curriculum planning to provide the process for improving the learning environment for all students.

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As more parents, and policymakers, and other stakeholders push for improvement in student achievement and demand that schools prepare children for life in the information age, school library media centers have an important role to play in the success of local school improvement plans, especially in the literacy area by "increasing collaboration between instructional and school library media center staff, providing additional materials and resources, and extending hours of operation during non-school hours" (U.S Department of Education, 2002).

Traditionally, school libraries have been viewed as supplemental and detached from the classroom because librarians have had little contact with classroom teachers and their curricular objectives, except for locating reference materials and circulation of books. As schools sharpen their focus on improving student achievement, many professional associations are focusing on using the school library media program as a

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catalyst for school reform. "Our focus has been to make libraries learning centers of the school—to change the way kids learn so that they learn actively, they are responsible for gathering information, making decisions, and demonstrating what they have learned" (Barbara K. Stripling, 1997).

Leadership Role of the Library Media Specialist: In 1988, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) published its guidelines about school library media programs, Information Power. This publication, along with its follow-up published in 1998, provided an inspiring vision of the future of the library media specialist in the information-rich society. In the authors' view, library media specialists will need to wear many professional hats and take on many roles. To help redefine leadership and community perceptions about the changing role of the school library media specialists in student education, new titles and roles were needed. These include four basic categories: teacher, instructional partner, information specialist, and program administrator.Each element emphasizes the library media specialist's leadership in the implementation of the library media program.

Teacher: As teacher, the media specialist models and promotes effective and collaborative teaching in order to achieve content objectives, while demonstrating the use of process-based models for instruction. In the task of coordinating the information services with the information needs and interests of the library's patrons, the library media specialist must ensure that students are effective users of ideas and information. This principle describes the central vision of AASL, and it is also the central tenet of the library profession. It highlights the most important and enduring role that the library

media specialists play within the school-"that of the provider of information services and skills instruction" (Lowe, C. 2000).

These roles have provided guiding principles for the school library media specialist, but leadership is required for library media specialists to "commit themselves to the central principles that define their roles as information specialists and educators—helping students to achieve optimum use of information literacy" (Lowe, C., 2000). To assume the instructional leadership role, the school media specialist will have to be involved with the school improvement planning team in a proactive manner to serve as a catalyst for effective learning as well as a facilitator in helping others reach their full potential.

The school library media specialist must be a curricular leader and a full participant on the instructional team. To carry out the leadership role successfully, he/she must possess attributes common to all leaders. Some of these attributes include: competence, confidence, flexibility, consistency, fairness, ability to communicate, and to delegate tasks, ability to get along with people, and ability to identify and effectively deal with conflict situations. Effective leaders should be able to articulate the vision of the library media program with "enthusiasm and confidence, inspiring others to support its goals" (AASL 42).

As an instructional leader, the school library media specialist deals with teaching, collaborative program planning, curriculum development, and staff development. The school library media specialist teaches everything a classroom teacher might teach, always with a focus on integrating information or technology processing skills into the content. Library skills should not be taught separately from classroom curriculum. When

the school library media specialist is involved with teaching, he/she will work with classroom teachers to ensure students learn how to become effective information processors.

Instructional Partner: A fundamental responsibility of the library media specialist is to "provide the leadership and expertise necessary to ensure that the library media program is an integral part of the instructional program of the school." (AASL, 26). As instructional partner, the library media specialist must demonstrate use of various teaching strategies to encourage integration of information resources into curriculum and instruction. The library media center houses a lot of intellectual resources, enabling the school library media specialist to play a proactive leadership role in resource-based learning by cooperating with the classroom teacher in planning learning activities, which will empower students to be independent users of information and lifelong learners. Some examples of various activities in which the school library media specialist working in conjunction with the classroom teacher can become involved in direct instruction with students include learning centers, learning stations, information quest, research/book projects, and ready reference quest centers.

The school library media specialist can establish collaborative partnerships with classroom teachers by serving on curriculum development committees in all areas in order to integrate information literacy and provide instructional resources to students and teachers. The school library media specialist can also assist teachers and students in the effective use of instructional resources. The school library media center is an extension of the classroom. The primary role of the school media specialist is instructional, and since most have taught in the classroom before moving to the school library media position,

they need to be actively involved as instructional partners in the analysis of student learning needs and the identification of goals for improving student learning to empower them in becoming competent information problem solvers and lifelong learners.

In collaborative planning with teachers, the school library media specialist must use his/her leadership role in seeking out opportunities to initiate collaborative efforts with teachers to define learning goals and objectives that students will achieve. He/she needs to be flexible and approachable, and together they can preplan, teach, and evaluate resource-based learning activities that will guide students' learning to achieve the stated goals and objectives. In most cases, teachers tend to work in isolation. The leadership and collaborative initiative of the school library media specialist can challenge this way of teaching to benefit the students.

It is the responsibility of school library media specialists to promote the library media program by articulating their roles in preparing students to become lifelong learners equipped to function in an information-and technology-rich workplace. Gary Hartzell (1997) refers to library media specialists as "invisible" professionals. He suggests that in many school districts, library media specialists should be participants in the decisions affecting technology, curriculum, and resources at the school and district level. Library media specialists need to assume a leadership role in promoting the principles of intellectual freedom by creating and sustaining an environment that encourages free inquiry and exposes students to a broad range of ideas.

Information Specialist: "As information specialist, the library media specialist provides leadership and expertise in acquiring and evaluating information resources in all formats" (Information Power, 1998. p. 5). Library media centers are sources of

information, and school library media specialists not only provide information from a wide array of sources but also teach the students how to use that information and process the information to achieve learning objectives. With the rise in the use of computers in the research process, school library media specialists must assume the roles of technology leaders at their schools to assist their users by means of computer and telecommunications technology for information retrieval and resource sharing.

School library media centers house a variety of resources such as automated circulation and cataloging systems, computers with Internet access and other software. The library media specialist must serve as a leader and resource person who understands the role of technology in instruction, student learning, and professional development. Integration of the library media program is not about how much hardware, software, and books are available or even if they are used; it is about how the library media program and the library media specialist support clearly defined learning objectives.

Library media specialists need to constantly and continually attend professional development workshops to acquire new skills in response to the technological demands of the students and teachers at the school sites. With this knowledge and expertise, they can educate fellow teachers as well as students to be responsible and ethical users of information. The school library media specialist must take the leadership initiative to attend any technological meetings where school based technological decisions are made.

The library media specialist can provide curricular support to programs in the school as well as new programs being introduced by taking the leadership role in promoting various resources available in the media center to teachers and students. This can be done through hosting of workshops and staff development activities for teachers to

familiarize them with available print and non-print resources at all levels, and sharing of instructional materials. This is a way to bridge the gap between classrooms and the library media center and to promote the library as the learning resource center of the school. When teachers and students view the school media center as a source of productive energy in the school, then the library media specialist has been successful in using the leadership vision in creating an environment of which teachers, students, administrators and parents wish to be a part.

Program Administrator: As a program administrator, the library media specialist "works collaboratively with members of the learning community to define the policies of the library media program and to guide and direct all the activities related to it" (Information Power 1998, p. 5). The program administrator should demonstrate proficiency in the use of management software and should demonstrate leadership in the development of the library media center program in relation to the total school program.

Since the library media specialist is charged with wearing many hats as a program administrator, the library media specialist fosters the leadership role by establishing annual and long–range goals for the library media program, plans, arranges, administers, operates, supervises the library media center, and develops policy for efficient operation and optimal service. The library media specialist also utilizes the district's adopted selection policy to develop a collection of learning resources that enhance teaching and learning.

The library media specialist cannot operate a stand-alone program. As a visionary, he/she should seek input from administrators and teachers in budgeting, program planning, and collection development of both print and non-print materials. The media

specialist in the daily administration of the media center would maintain accurate records of the library media holdings, including acquisition, circulation, and maintenance such as cataloging, inventory, and weeding of obsolete and worn materials. The library media specialist, as an administrator should maintain open channels of communication throughout the district and the community to foster collaboration with other libraries, such as local and academic libraries.

Library scheduling is one of the major tasks of the program administrator in making certain everyone in the school has access to the library media center for a variety of instructional and research activities. This will foster an atmosphere that encourages student and teacher use. When school library media specialists exercise their leadership roles of teacher, instructional partner, information specialist, and program administrator, program implementation will require the involvement and support of all stakeholders. One strategy will be to create a well-informed group of teachers and administrators with a clear sense of mission and the confidence that can bring about change.

The attitude of school administrators toward the role of the library media specialist can affect the school library media specialist's involvement in curricular issues. According to Ellen and Hilda Jay (1990), wherever library media programs have been especially successful, there have been strong, informed, and active partnerships forged among the principal, the classroom teachers, and the library media personnel. Effective school library media centers are characterized by strong administrative support.

According to Keith C. Lance (1993), advocates of school library media centers have long been convinced of the relationship between strong library media programs and academic achievement. There have been numerous studies done and reports written about

the impact of school library media centers on academic achievement, and all have come to the same conclusion as echoed by Ken Haycock, that there is "ample evidence of the impact of school library media specialists and school library media centers on students' learning, given certain conditions and criteria" (Ken Haycock, 1995). Given these findings, school library media specialists need to play the leadership role of change agents to promote the school library media program by playing a proactive role in the school improvement plan.

Conclusions

When a school develops the school improvement plan, it becomes the template against which the school's performance is judged. Stakeholders have their vision of a school improvement plan which calls for a learner-centered educational system that should be recognized for its ability to provide students with the knowledge and skills required to achieve high levels of critical thinking skills in the information rich global community. The library media program is a very important part of the school improvement plan, and school library media specialists have an important role to play to the success of school improvement plans, especially in the literacy area by increasing collaboration between the teachers and providing additional instructional resources.

The media specialist needs to act as a leader by examining the educational system in terms of evaluating its successes and failures, by becoming an important advocate for curriculum development, and by integrating information skills into all areas and levels of the school curriculum that would require the teachers and students to use the library media center. Bringing the library media program's vision into reality requires building

effective partnerships with all stakeholders in our schools and community to make our dream and vision of the school library media center a reality.

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